



Second Nature Home Boutique is a small storefront social enterprise business located in the Cedar Cottage neighbourhood in East Vancouver. The shop, modelled as a business and operated by Elizabeth McKittrick, opened in 2014. Their goal is to provide the neighbourhood with locally made, upcycled, recycled, fair trade products, and refillable items. The shop houses a selection of home essentials, gifts, decorations, and artisan crafts, at a variety of prices, which they hope will encourage locals to purchase sustainable and local no matter their budget.

Providing Sustainable Goods to the Community

The shop prioritizes making sustainable shopping accessible for anyone from seasoned zero waste shoppers to customers wanting to learn more about eco-friendly home and gift options. By providing goods at various price points, the store hopes they can contribute to a shift in making sustainable shopping more accessible. "We wanted to be a welcoming neighbourhood space and contribute to a more just society for all people." Opening the shop also contributed to diversifying the retail types available in the neighbourhood. Neighbourhood patrons have a closeby refill station to purchase household soaps, personal toiletries, and other quality, affordable local items. Making sustainable practices feel more within reach – financially and logistically – for the neighbourhood audience has been a big goal for the shop. In addition to the goods sold at the shop, Second Nature has also assisted in a number of workshops at the local community centre for people interested in learning more about zero waste and local products. Elizabeth feels this is a great way to connect with the community and get people thinking about how they can incorporate sustainable practices into their current lifestyles.

Second Nature also recognizes the importance of supporting diverse makers and local suppliers. They sell a number of products made by Indigenous, female, and immigrant workers who can better reach markets through a local storefront. The store works with the Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House to connect to female and immigrant makers and provide them support to be able to sell their goods at the store. The shop also sources locally made products through the LOCO BC network.



A third goal of the store is to promote zero waste practices on their front and back ends. The store works with their suppliers and makers to reduce their waste by encouraging them to use reusable, recyclable, non-plastic packaging that reduce waste. This includes using post-consumer cardboard, minimizing tags, and reducing or purchasing refill items. The store credits much of their back end waste reduction success to the strong relationships they have with suppliers. In some instances, Second Nature's waste reduction inquiries presented the first time some suppliers were asked to consider different packaging options. "We've had some long-term relationships that are really important to us [where] we were their first refiller in Vancouver," remarks Elizabeth. They also encourage suppliers to take back their containers and adopt a closed loop supply system. They're "[t]rying to work with our makers so that they're taking back their bottles. So that we can have a closed loop on that part."

Changes due to COVID

Store Hours and Added Option for 'Phone Shopping' with Contactless Pickup

There were four major changes for the store when the COVID-19 pandemic gained momentum: adjusting store hours; making online purchases available; changing in-store shopping procedures; and adjusting their refill practices. The first major change to the store was to decrease their operating hours. The store went from being open 45 hours a week to only being open 28 hours a week (12-5 Monday to Friday and 2-5 on Sunday). A big part of this shift was because the store's only employee couldn't come into the shop due to COVID-19-related transit challenges. Elizabeth worked solo until she was able to safely staff up again. To supplement decreased in-store sales and capture customers who may have switched to online shopping, she decided to open up their own version of a combined online viewing of product examples, phone call shopping, and subsequent pick up. To keep things simple she decided against a full online shopping platform in favour of a hybrid online/call in/curbside pick-up system. To order, customers call or email the store to see what's in stock and the store sends pictures or describes items that the customer might be interested in. Then the customer sends the store an e-transfer and the items are packed and available for contactless curbside pick-up. One challenge of this process has been to keep up to date photos and descriptions online of the various products in the store. Elizabeth explains, "we have a rapidly changing environment with products because we have so many small little makers", which can make keeping an up to date account of items online challenging.

In-Store Shopping Adjustments

In-store shopping adjustments include limiting the number of customers shopping at once, requiring the mask and applying hand sanitizer upon entry, implementing a no touch shopping policy, and preventing stockpiling of items. Early on in the pandemic customers allowed in the store were limited to one at a time to facilitate social distancing. Now with increased awareness and changing government guidelines, the store allows two people to shop at once. The store has a sign outside to remind customers to maintain their distance and Elizabeth also reminds customers to wear a mask and use sanitizer before they enter the store. The store also implemented a no touch shopping policy for testing products and shoppers can no longer exchange or return goods once they take them home. The main goal of this policy is to reduce the amount of browsing that the customer has to do in the store and make their experience streamlined and efficient. This ensures minimum contact between people and less potential germ transfer on common surfaces. The store also put limits on the amounts of essential items purchased per customer to prevent stockpiling. "We have [purchasing] limits on essential items like hand sanitizer, hand soaps, no stockpiling to ensure quantities are fair and available." This ensures that any customer coming into the store has equal chance to purchase an item and reduces concern that the store will run out of something before they have a chance to purchase it. Another small change the store made was to stop accepting cash because bank lines have been longer than usual and it would limit time spent at the store.



"[W]e have a lot of immune compromised people that shop in the shop so we want to be sure that they have a safe environment they can come to."

Continuing Refill

The last major change for in-store shopping was finding a way to continue the refill program while following provincial and municipal health guidelines. While some other stores have stopped refilling customer containers, the provincial guidelines have never banned it. The store also only refills mainly soap and personal care products, so the likelihood of transmitting germs is much lower. “[W]e’re dealing with a product that the chances of it transmitting anything is very low; but, we’re still just as careful, like it doesn’t absolve you from being careful.” To make sure they are still following proper precautions the store uses the retail tips sheet from the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety for Coronavirus procedures. At first this meant sanitizing the refill and cashier counter before and after every refill, but this turned out to be inefficient and was causing damage to the counter. Instead the store has switched to using single use paper sheets to cover the counter which has the same level of protection for customers without the damaging chemicals. On the customers part they must bring in their containers clean on the outside, but they are allowed to have some soap left on the inside as this poses extremely low risk for virus load. The customers must remove lids themselves and they are only allowed to place containers on the counter. Any equipment used during the refill process that may come in contact with customer containers, “the scale, the pump bottles, our hands, the screen”, gets sanitized before and after refilling containers for that customer.



Challenges of COVID-19

Changing Rules for Retail

There have also been a number of challenges to coping with COVID-19 conditions, including increased uncertainty in the retail space and changes to product supply. One of the first challenges to deal with was the broad uncertainty of COVID-19 and rapidly changing rules for retail establishments regarding social distancing, mask mandates, and cleaning. They had to decide how to proceed when someone brought their child with them to shop. When the store first had a one customer policy they had trouble with bringing in an extra person. Then as they put in the no touch policy they found it was easier not to have kids in the store because they were more likely to want to pick up the products. They resolved the child question by allowing one 'babe in arms' so access to the store could be maintained for those with a small child. Another challenge was the changing rules about mandatory mask wearing and dealing with customers who felt that it should be mandatory versus those who did not wish to wear a mask. This led to some challenging encounters with customers who were uncertain the store was following provincial guidelines. "I've had somebody that was really quite nasty toward me once. And I can understand why part of it was because originally masks were not a requirement...And the person felt that I was just not doing what they needed me to do."

Uncertainty in the Supply Chain

Another challenge was dealing with uncertainty in the supply chain. Some companies chose to limit production of certain products or completely stop production which left gaps in the items available at the store. One example is that at the time of our interview the store was, "completely out of dish soap because our last order that we placed they couldn't give us any dish soap, because it wasn't in production." Another challenge with supply is that companies are facing increased shipping times for ingredients brought in from other countries, which creates bottlenecks in the supply chain. One way the store has tried to deal with these problems is to try and anticipate customer orders ahead of time and order more stock of products in advance to accommodate shortages and longer shipping times.



Planning for Winter

A final challenge has been planning for the holiday season. With all the uncertainty regarding local businesses the store can't predict what winter holiday shopping will look like this year. Because travel and tourism were limited in the summer months the store is hoping that the holiday boost will make up for some of the lost revenue. The store hopes that more people will shop locally and from small businesses this year to support local makers and sellers. The uncertainty of the season also creates a lot of stress on small businesses who feel they have to make up for decreased revenue in the spring and summer. It creates many questions for owners of small businesses who wonder, "How long is this going to go on? What is it going to look like? Are we going to still be able to pay our rent?"

Benefits of COVID

There have been some benefits to running the small business during the pandemic and the changes that have been implemented at the store. Reducing the store hours has worked out well because customers use the store hours more efficiently; the store is busier during their new open hours rather than customers spreading out over a longer day. While some customers may be upset they can't run in for a late pick up, the new operating hours have worked out well overall. Another benefit has been increased communication with customers to find out what their interests in products are and being able to cater more to the needs of the neighbourhood. The Support Local BC program has been another great asset to the shop and they've seen increased support through the program for community supporting local businesses. The program facilitated gift card purchases for local shops early in the pandemic which helped offset some revenue loss for stores and gave customers a reason to visit local shops after they reopened.

Key Lessons

The pandemic also provided the shop with the opportunity to learn more about their practices, customers, and community. Elizabeth encourages other shop owners to stay up to date on changing restrictions and rules enacted by the government and municipality but also to do your own research to understand what will work for your store. That research can help small business owners define their best practices and plan of action to implement changes quickly and effectively. Another helpful tip is to be clear with staff and customers about the expectations in the store and to keep those expectations as consistent as possible. This expectation management will ensure that everyone who enters the space can co-operate to make the business as safe as possible. With these expectations you also have to leave room to accommodate for uncertainty by being generous and flexible where possible. Engaging with staff and customers in a positive manner will help understand when to make concessions and when to stand firm in expectations of practices. Be open to asking for help and listen to suggestions. For example, the store was able to get a short-term rent reduction by checking in with the landlord. Asking for help may mean implementing more changes that help small businesses run more effectively and help customers more.